Distributed Image Management (DIM) for Cluster Administration

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Distributed Image Management (DIM) is a centralized cluster management tool developed by Peter Morjan at IBM for large scale computing systems. This report discusses the technology behind DIM and its features and benefits.

1 Distributed Image Management Overview

Large computing systems have large administration needs. But just as technologies have evolved to take advantage of certain parallelisms of large scale computing, administrating these technologies must evolve to take advantage of the associated operational efficiencies.

Using a straightforward push technology, and scalable to thousands of blades, Distributed Image Management (DIM) allows system administrators to boot, patch, or modify one, several, or all distributed images from a single management console in minutes.

DIM was prototyped on the MareNostrum cluster with 2406 blades, but is scalable to 7000 blades. Using IBM JS20 blade technology MareNostrum consists of 172 BladeCenters.

1.1 Introduction to DIM concepts

While saving administrators from the significant legwork of changing cluster operating systems one by one is important, speeding up management tasks is only one benefit to be realized from any large scale cluster administration tool. DIM was developed to satisfy many administrative needs:

- Maintaining multiple distributions on a cluster
- No distribution modification requirements
- Space savings with shared directories
- Protection of shared resources
- Synchronous or asynchronous image management
- High speed image updates
- Simple (single command) distribution swapping
- Simple hardware management

- Scalable performance

DIM was previously referred to as "Diskless Image Management," but the name was updated to Distributed Image Management for two reasons. First, the image management is in fact not diskless. Image servers have disk, and deliver images from disk to blades in a large cluster – although in practice excellent performance is achieved by holding much (or all) of the software delivered in memory. The central concept in DIM is the distribution of the tasks via distribution of software. Image delivery is done by image servers, which may be configured redundantly and which have robust I/O systems. The blades are tasked with activities for which they are best suited - receiving data and software over the networks and processing it. What results is improved performance, reliability, and management of blade clusters.

A second motivation for preferring the term Distributed Image Management over Diskless Image Management is to counter the commonly held misconception that an environment based on diskless images is necessarily a minimal or limited software environment. The Distributed Image Server approach is anything but limited. In fact, DIM enables straightforward management of rich Linux environments, since it so greatly eases the process of managing system software.

We discuss how DIM addresses each of these needs in the following sections.

1.2 Multiple Distribution Maintenance

With DIM, images are managed from image servers with each server supporting a defined set of blades in the cluster. In a distributed network architecture, communication between the image servers and the blades they support occurs over a separate boot network, and does not interfere with other network communication. See Figure 1.

The image servers receive a clone of a master blade image from the primary image server, or management node. As we will discuss later, this multi-level hierarchy scales better for very large clusters.

One master blade is needed for each personality/distribution. On these master blades, standard distribution installs occur which are then pulled onto the management server and pushed onto the image servers as needed to populate the individual blades. In this way, the image servers can manage different personalities of a single Linux distribution and/or multiple Linux distributions within a single cluster.

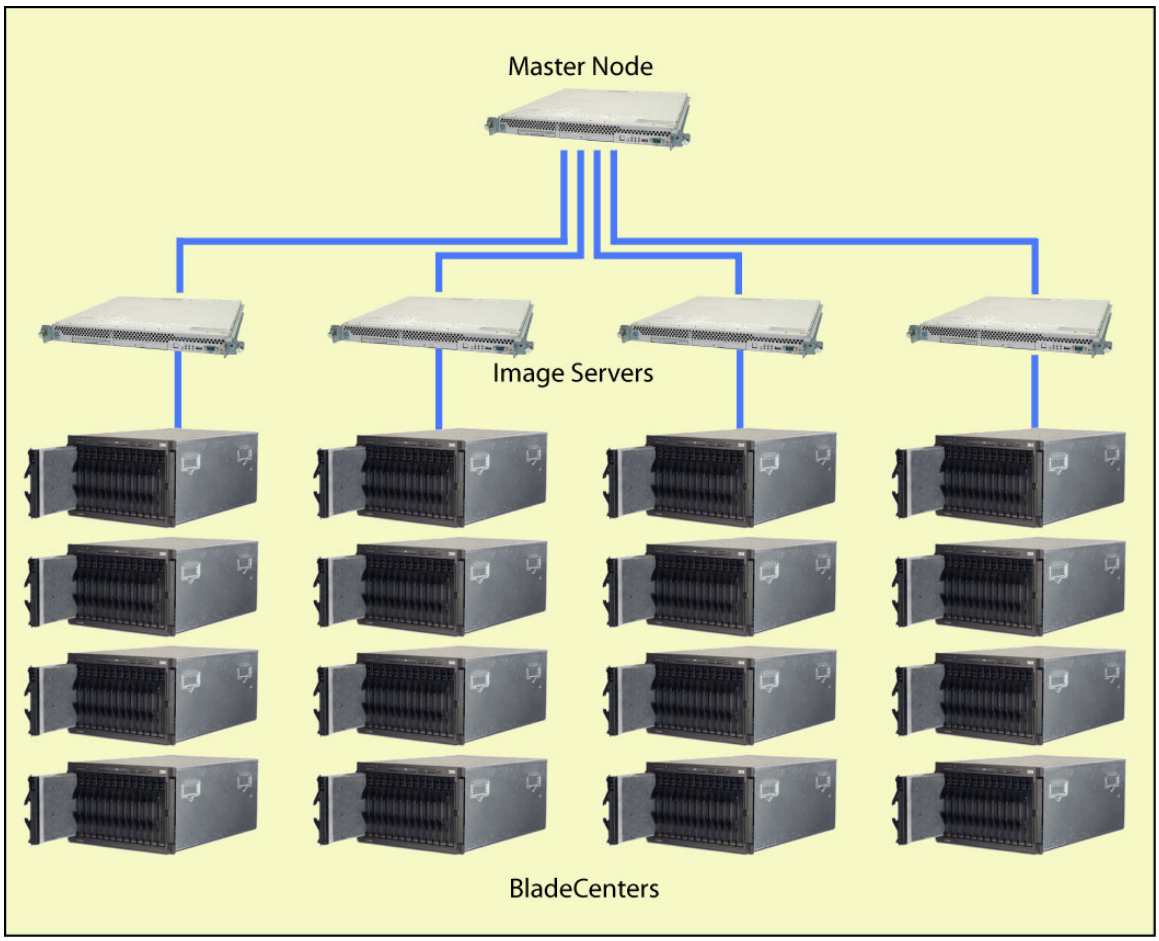

Figure 1

1.3 Distribution Integrity

DIM uses common Linux utilities, such as *dhcpd*, *snmp*, *nfs*, *tftp*, and *rsync* without modification, and has been tested with native RedHat and SuSE masters. It does require at minumum Linux 2.6 as the *linuxrc* feature introduced in 2.6 is a core component of DIM that allows each blade to mount the image boot from the image server. For more information, see section 2.4 which details the DIM Process.

The distribution and installation of DIM is equally non-invasive. DIM comes as an RPM package of Perl scripts and man pages. It is installed only on the image servers, while the master blade images are left unaltered.

1.4 Disk Space Savings

There is a large amount of redundancy in cluster management that can be leveraged specifically for the purpose of reducing disk space needs and therefore operational expenses. Each blade image managed by the image server is composed of two parts: the read-only image that is shared across all blades served by that image server, and the read-write image that is unique to each blade. The read-only portion of the image can only be

updated by the image server; whereas, the files in the read-write portion can be updated by the image server and by the individual blade as they would for log files. This differentiation provides significant overall space savings by storing only one copy of first level directories such as /usr/bin, yet still provides flexibility for image individualization.

1.5 Protection of Shared Resources

In addition to preventing write access to the shared image files, each read-write blade image is a single distinct file on the image server, and is accessed by its blade as an NFS exported loop-back mounted filesystem. This establishes an automatic quota for the image filesystem, and prevents rogue blades from corrupting a shared resource.

1.6 Flexible (Synchronous or Asynchronous) Image Management

Because clusters are shared resources themselves, and are rarely used as homogenous computational platforms, it is necessary to be able to manage blade images in a flexible manner. We have already seen that DIM is capable of managing several flavors of Linux on a single cluster. DIM also can be used to send administrative commands to any single blade, or to many blades in a cluster using a blade taxonomy we describe in section 2.2.

Images can also be updated incrementally from the image server, regardless of whether the blade is on or off.

1.7 High Speed Image Updates

Although the time savings from pushing image updates to a cluster is already quite substantial, DIM technology uses the Linux *rsync* facility, which means that incremental updates are fast. If changes are contained in a first level read-only directory, updating a few files across thousands of nodes takes only a few seconds. If you are performing a global synchronization, an update can take as little as 2-6 minutes if only a few files require updating. The more files that require updating, the more time it will take. For example, to push four months of images updates across 2000 blades, it could take 40 minutes.

1.8 Simple Distribution Swapping

DIM manages system images with a very simple set of commands. For example, if a system administrator wants to change the distribution installed on a set of blades, from the management node he can manage the DHCPD configuration file on every image server with a single command called dim dhcp. The dim_dhcp command assigns an image to an actual physical blade by creating or updating an entry for the MAC address of that blade. Thus, a single command can update images across the cluster. For more information on DIM commands, see section 2.3.

1.9 Simple Hardware Management

Along with simple software management, it is important for a cluster management tool to be able to easily manage hardware modifications. To handle identification of thousands of blades, DIM uses an XML definition file to describe the geography of the cluster, and a plug-in mechanism to get the MAC addresses for cluster components.

The XML definition file can handle any type of hierarchy of names. In the case of a cluster of BladeCenters for instance, we use names with three modifiers to identify the rack number, the BladeCenter within the rack, and the blade number within the BladeCenter. See section 2.2 for more details.. When a new blade gets plugged in, the management module picks up its MAC address using SNMP, and maps it to a component name in the definition file.

1.10 Scalable Performance

A single image server performs adequately for clusters up to 56 blades. When the number of blades in a cluster becomes large, however, DIM makes it easy to add a layer in the hierarchy. The management node pushes information over a separate network, the bootnet, to the slave layer of image servers, which in turn push images to the cluster subset it is responsible for. Using a hierarchical network architecture reduces the possibility of network contention during high throughput times and also distributes the risk of cluster failure, as the loss of a single image server would only affect the set of blades it is responsible for.

2 DIM Technical Details

In the following sections we review DIM technology, including network architecture, blade taxonomy, DIM commands, and the DIM process, in greater detail and in the context of a large blade cluster.

2.1 Architecture

As we discussed in section 1.10, it is possible to run DIM on a cluster from a single image server and a global network. However, a distributed bootnet architecture – two or more layers of image servers, and a distributed network – is recommended for large clusters due to its superior scalability. We refer to the primary image server as the management node.

In the implementation shown below in Figure 2, there are four separate networks used to communicate within the cluster. For the purposes of this technical report, we are concerned primarily with the bootnet and the usernet networks.

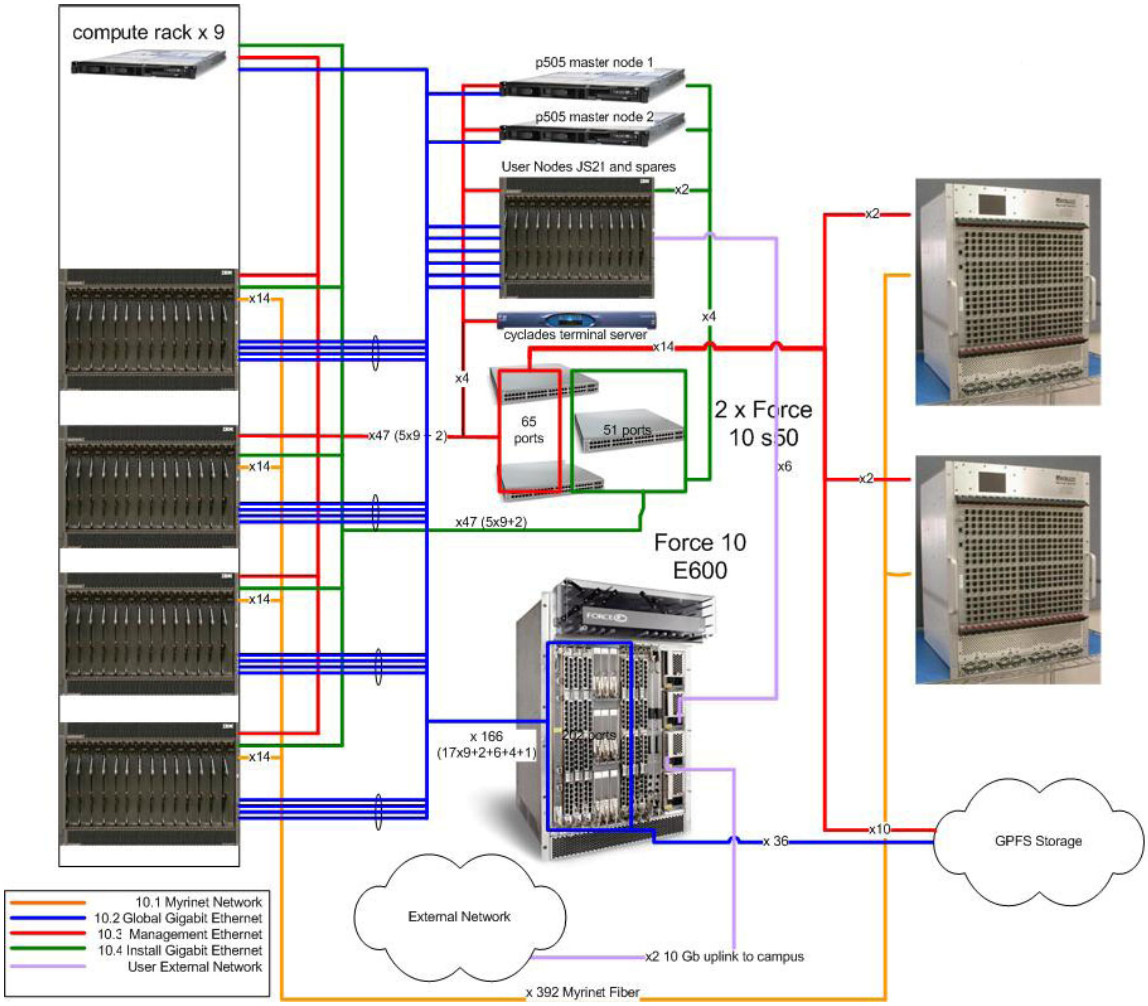

Figure 2

When we talk of a distributed bootnet, we are talking of a network that is isolated to a given image server and the BladeCenters chassis it manages. Typically the blade's first ethernet interface (eth0) and BladeCenter's Switch Module 1 is used to form this. The dhcpd daemon running on the image server is told to listen to only its bootnet NIC, and the images are exported via NFS to its blades over this network.

The global ethernet is formed with the blade's eth1 and BladeCenter Switch Module 2. No system administration or image support is performed on this network that we call usernet. The usernet spans the entire cluster and is available to user processes to communicate within the cluster and via gateways to the internet at large.

The benefits of a distributed bootnet can be summarized as follows:

- Minimal network congestion when booting the entire cluster
- User traffic does not create contention with image management fundtions
- Global network (usernet) failure does not result in reboot of entire cluster
- More IO bandwidth into the blades for both user and management needs

2.2 Taxonomy

The issue of usably naming thousands of blades in a cluster is addressed by the creation of an XML definition file. You can define any hierarchy of names you require for your cluster. For BladeCenters, we have found that a three-level structure is most effective.

In the taxonomy we use for MareNostrum, each blade is assigned three numbers in the cluster coordinate system – the image server number, the BladeCenter chassis number, and the blade number – and is represented as sXXcYbZZ. The variable XX ranges from 1 through 42, the number of image servers deployed in the cluster, Y ranges from 1 through 4, the number of BladeServers managed by an image server, and ZZ ranges from 1 through 14, the number of blades in a BladeCenter chassis. In order to perform an operation within a BladeCenter chassis - for instance, to power it up or down - we have created a component name that is represented as sXXcYmm.

While this three-dimensional coordinate system is useful for pinpointing a specific component geographically, there are times when you will need to cycle through a sequence of components in a linear fashion. For this case we have assigned a sequential name to each component as well as the logical name. The linear equivalent of s1c1b1 is b1, and the equivalent of s1c2b14 is b28. Similarly, for BladeCenter components, s1c1mm is equivalent to mm1 (BladeCenter chassis 1), and s23c2mm is equivalent to mm90 (BladeCenter chassis 90).

The DNS nameserver is programmed to reflect the same naming schema as the XML definition file.

2.3 Commands and Scripts

DIM has only nine administrative commands, and comes with a small sample script for synchronizing images. The commands and their descriptions are listed below:

Command	Description
dim_dhcp	Manage the dhcpd.conf file on the management node and image servers.
dim_image	Create blade image files 9n the image servers
dim_buildzimage	Build the blades' network bootable kernel zImage.
dim_nfs	Export image files using nfs.
dim_bctool	Utility to manage BladeCenter via SNMP. This command is for blade specific operations, such as "power on blade 6".
dim_bcadmin	Utility to manage BladeCenter via SNMP. This command is for BladeCenter chassis wide operations, such as "power on whole chassis".
dim_sync_master	Pull image changes from master blade (master blade to management node).

dim_sync_server	Push changes from management node to other image servers.
dim_sync_image	Distribute copies within the image server for each served blade.

The last three commands listed, *dim_sync_master*, *dim_sync_server*, and *dim_sync_image*, make up the three step process of globally distributing image updates from the master blade to each blade. We have created a short, customizable script, *syncit*, to handle these commands and is run by the administrator on the management node.

Because granular image updates are common, *syncit* takes a directory or filename to synchronize as an optional argument. Without the argument, the entire system image is incrementally synchronized with the master. You can customize the script for your specific environment by hardcoding network and distribution information, including the distribution name, the hostname of the master blade, and the list of images servers, at the beginning of the script.

2.4 DIM process

The following steps describe the key points in the DIM image distribution and boot process, and are illustrated in Figure 3.

1) Run dim_image to create images from directory master. This step creates both the read-only and read-write image files for each blade image.
2) Copy the master node's system image to the management node's image server.
3) Copy the management node's system image to the image servers.
4) Run dim_nfs to make images accessible to blades (via NFS export/mount) on each image server.
5) Run dim_build_zimage to create boot zImage in /tftpboot. This image is the native distribution kernel, but with a custom linuxrc. This step creates the bootable kernel for the individual blades.
6) Run dim_dhcp to assign distributions to the blades; i.e. update dhcp.conf.

Once the images have been distributed, the blades boot via the following process:

1) Blade network boots zImage from Image Server
2) Blade mounts root filesystem from storage server during custom linuxrc execution.
3) CHROOT to mounted new root filesystem, continue standard Linux boot process.

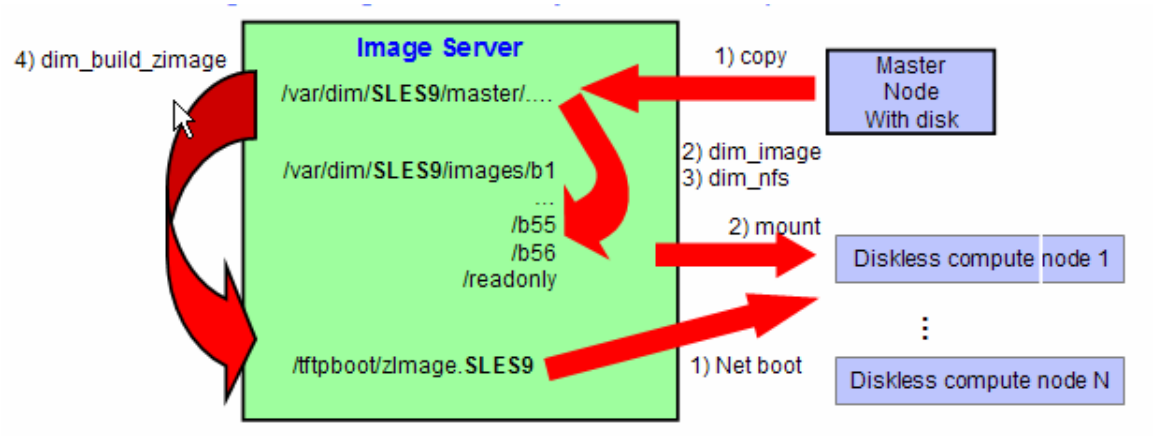

Figure 3

Synchronizing the distributed images to changes made to the master image is simply a matter of applying the *syncit* script, or equivalently, the execution of the following three steps. These steps are illustrated in Figure 4.

1) Run dim_sync_master to pull image changes from the master blade to the management node.
2) Run dim_sync_server to push the changes from the management node to the other image servers.
3) Run dim_sync_image to make image copies for each served blade.

Since these files are already mounted to their respective blades, once the images are copied the blades see the changes immediately.

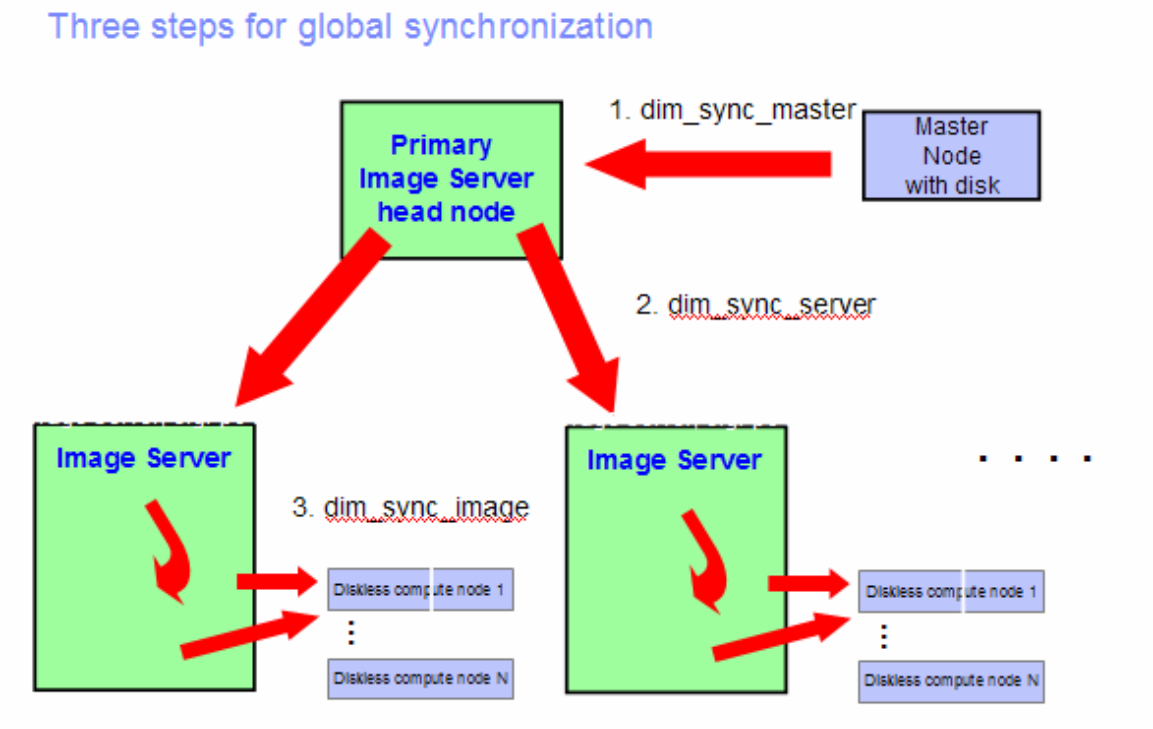

Figure 4

3 The advantages of DIM

Distributed Image Management (DIM) is a superior tool for large scale cluster management. For system management issues, DIM provides:

- Speed and simplicity of updates
- Scales to thousands of blades with simple 2-level hierarchy
- Dynamic update
- No changes to Linux required
- Asynchronous image management
- Multiple distributions supported
- Saves space with shared read-only directories

In terms of reliability, DIM has:

- Fewer moving parts
- No contention with users for network bandwidth
- No clusterwide single point of failure with the hierarchical architecture